



UNIVERSITY OF
FLORIDA

IFAS EXTENSION

Rotating Extension Article

The week of April 17, 2006

Daniel E. Mullins

Extension Commercial Horticulture Agent

Santa Rosa County

Fresh Market Fruit and Vegetable Growers Gearing Up For the Season

Cotton and peanut farmers are preparing for another growing season and thousands of acres of these two crops will be planted in Santa Rosa County over the next few weeks. Less noticed but also important, is vegetable crop production. During an average year, most of the warm season vegetables would have been planted by early April. Though much has already been planted on irrigated land, the “driest March on record” which occurred this year, is sure to delay the establishment of vegetable fields where irrigation is not available.

Most of the vegetables being produced commercially in Santa Rosa County are for local fresh market sales. For this kind of marketing the farmer grows and harvests the vegetables and tries to sell them in a very fresh state within easy driving distance. The method of sale varies with the producer. Some sell at roadside stands, on the farm or at public markets. A few might open their farm for U-pick, allowing customers to harvest their own produce.

This is known as direct marketing, and when all goes well it is a good system and works for many growers who produce on only a few acres. As the name implies, the farmer produces the crop for sale directly to the consumer. There are several advantages for both the consumer and seller. The consumer has some assurance that the vegetables being purchased are grown in the area by a local resident, and there is also the possibility of obtaining some of the freshest produce available.

The seller, who in this case is also the producer, is free to make independent decisions concerning which crops will be grown and the amount of each that will be planted without signing a binding contract. On the other hand, the farmer is gambling each season that the kind and volume of vegetables being grown can be sold, and at a profit.

It would seem logical that more money could be made by simply increasing the acreage under production and selling more, but it is more complicated than that. It is easy to saturate the local fresh market base with a single crop, so it would then be necessary to enter the world of conventional vegetable production and marketing. Stepping from the world of local sales to what is now known as “conventional marketing” is a large step and one that has not been taken to a great degree in our area yet.

Conventional marketing generally means dealing with brokers and contracts and growing on a larger scale to meet the volume that is required. Large volume buyers often also require specific amounts of produce on certain dates and at a certain stage of development and quality. Though unfortunately not applicable to many small farmers unless they are highly organized, this is a complex yet efficient

system that keeps the produce department at the larger grocery stores stocked with a predictable supply of vegetables at relatively low cost.

Dan Mullins is Commercial Horticulture Agent for Santa Rosa County.

Extension Service programs are open to all people without regard to race, creed, color, religion, age, disability, sex, sexual orientation, marital status, national origin, political opinions or affiliations. The use of trade names in this article is solely for the purpose of providing specific information. It is not a guarantee, warranty, or endorsement of the product name(s) and does not signify that they are approved to the exclusion of others.